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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HAVANA 000271

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TAGS: [SOCI](#) [PHUM](#) [KPAO](#) [CU](#)
SUBJECT: EMOTIONAL MARCH 18 FOR DAMAS DE BLANCO

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HAVANA 00000271 001.3 OF 002

Classified By: COM Michael E. Parmly; Reasons 1.4 (b/d)

11. (C) Summary: Cuba's Damas de Blanco (Ladies in White), spouses/relatives of political prisoners, commemorated the fourth anniversary of the 2003 crackdown with their trademark appearance at Santa Rita Church and march down Havana's 5th Avenue, followed by an emotional video-conference with former political prisoners and their relatives in Miami (hosted jointly by USINT and Radio/TV Marti). The day before, the Damas marched down the seafront "Malecon" avenue, and posed for pictures in a mock jail cell. Sunday evening they attended a mass for Miguel Valdes Tamayo, a former political prisoner from the 2003 crackdown who died soon after the Cuban regime released him. The Damas (please protect strictly) are coordinating an opposition-wide appeal to the UN Human Rights Council to free all Cuban political prisoners. We have learned (and are reporting septel) that the Damas' continuing activities have put them on a collision course with regime security forces.
End Summary.

12. (U) Attending Sunday mass and marching down 5th Avenue are the Damas' stock in trade. However, Sunday, March 18 was not just another Sunday, but rather the fourth anniversary of the 2003 crackdown that put 75 dissidents in jail. That was the proximate cause for the founding of the Damas de Blanco, who are the female relatives, mostly wives, of those 75. March 18, 2007 attracted considerable media attention and a healthy turnout at Santa Rita Church by European members of the diplomatic corps, as well as USINT. Additionally, five members of the Italian Radical party (including one Member of Parliament and another European Parliamentarian) unfurled a banner saying "Freedom and non-violence for Cuba" and marched near Santa Rita Church.

13. (SBU) Video-Conference: Following the march, most of the Damas, accompanied by some of the 75 who have been released from prison on health grounds, reassembled at the USINT PAO residence, just two blocks from Santa Rita. With the help of Radio/TV Marti and Cuban exile NGOs based in Miami, USINT staged a live video-conference with the Damas on this end and former Cuban political prisoners and family members in Miami. This was an emotional event for both audiences, providing each with a sense of connectedness and community under the cruel circumstances imposed upon them by the Castro

dictatorship.

-- In Havana, principal Damas representative Laura Pollan said the contact with the exile group gave her more courage and energy to carry on the fight to release her husband and the others. Most of the Damas present, plus some of the released 75ers, got a turn to identify themselves and make a similar statement about: 1) the enduring agony of having a loved one imprisoned; and 2) the importance and the energy that they derive from support from the exile community, the diplomatic corps and publicity of their activities.

-- The Miami group, which included many close personal friends of the Damas and 75ers, was as sympathetic and supportive as possible. One of the organizers wrote us to say: "This has truly been the most memorable event I have been privileged to be a part of. From our end we could feel the electricity, and everyone was extremely pleased to have been able to participate ... I will never forget their faces and their words. Determination, courage and dignity are the best words to describe the guiding principles of the interaction. There was not a dry eye in the room; not even the people providing technical assistance could avoid it."

¶4. (SBU) Other Activities: The Damas on Saturday set up a makeshift jail cell at Laura Pollan's home and posed for photographs. Also on Saturday they marched down Havana's seafront "Malecon" avenue. They attended a mass for fallen 75er Miguel Valdes Tamayo. During the video-conference, Laura Pollan announced that five Damas from Ciego de Avila and Camaguey gathered and marched to mark the occasion. Some of the Damas in these Cuban cities and elsewhere were forcefully prevented from traveling to Havana. One participant in the video-conference said she had to disguise herself to be able to travel from her home in the interior to Havana. Another called home to Santiago and learned that her

HAVANA 00000271 002.3 OF 002

house was surrounded by State Security agents. One of the Miami participants in the video-conference said that parallel March 18 events in support of the Damas were taking place in Italy, Germany, The Netherlands, Spain, and elsewhere. We and the Damas also saw media reports of the mock Cuban prison cell set up this week in a Prague public square by the Czech NGO "People in Need."

¶5. (SBU) Additionally, USINT has learned that 84 activists in Villa Clara are holding a week-long fast, and that a dozen dissidents gathered at the Havana home of former political prisoner Leonardo Bruzon to commemorate March 18. We are aware of at least two dissidents being detained over the weekend, including Aurelio Bachiller, one of the leaders of Cuba's free labor movement.

¶6. (C) Follow-Up: Pollan and COM discussed the former's initiative to circulate a broad Cuban opposition appeal to the UN Human Rights Council to release all Cuban political prisoners (numbering roughly 280). Given some of the rivalries in the democratic opposition, the Damas recognize that they are the one group, representing the one cause that unites everybody: "Release the Political Prisoners." The two most well-known opposition figures, Martha Beatriz Roque and Oswaldo Paya, have indicated to us that they would agree to sign onto such an appeal, if/when asked.

¶7. (C) Comment: We could not possibly imagine a better use of video-conferencing than this. We already heard on March 19 from a dissident in Matanzas, that the Radio Marti rebroadcast of the video-conference was on the air and well-received. This is gratifying, but also an opportunity to create momentum to push harder for the release of the political prisoners.

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